

Message Text

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AMCONSUL STRASBOURG
ALL EC CAPITALS 0297

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 PARIS 01697

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: FR, PGOV, PFOR, PINT
SUBJECT: PRESIDENT GISCARD D'ESTAING'S PRESS CONFERENCE
EMBASSY ANALYSIS

REF: PARIS 01564

SUMMARY. PRESIDENT GISCARD D'ESTAING USED HIS JANUARY
17 PRESS CONFERENCE TO TOUCH ON A NUMBER OF IMPORTANT
SUBJECTS CURRENTLY OF CONCERN TO THE FRENCH. HE PRO-
MISED THE BARRE PLAN WOULD BE PUSHED AND MADE GENERALLY
OPTIMISTIC PREDICTIONS CONCERNING THE FRENCH ECONOMY.
HE STRESSED THE GOVERNMENT'S CONTINUED ATTENTION TO
UNEMPLOYMENT BUT POINTED OUT THAT UNEMPLOYMENT AND
INFLATION WERE TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN. IN ADDI-
TION, HE GAVE AN INDIRECT BOOST TO BARRE'S EFFORTS TO
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EDUCATE THE UNIONS. HE REINFORCED HIS ONGOING POLICY
OF PRESIDENTIALIZING THE REGIME AND PUT PM BARRE FLATLY
IN CHARGE OF THE MAJORITY AS CONCERNS FORTHCOMING
ELECTIONS. HIMSELF HE PLACED ABOVE POLITICS. PICKING
UP THE THEME FROM "DEMOCRATIE FRANCAISE" HE CALLED FOR
PLURALISM IN MANY ASPECTS OF FRENCH POLITICAL AND SO-
CIAL LIFE. THOUGH HE HEDGED SOME QUESTIONS, HE WAS HIS

USUAL ADEPT AND LIGHTFOOTED SELF WHEN DEALING WITH THE PRESS. THE OVERALL IMPRESSION LEFT BY THE CONFERENCE SEEMS TO BE GENERALLY FAVORABLE AND IT IS CERTAIN THAT THE PRESIDENT WILL CONTINUE TO USE SUCH PLATFORMS TO MAKE HIS POLICIES KNOWN IN THE FUTURE. END SUMMARY.

2. BACKGROUND: THE TIMING OF THE PRESIDENT'S CONFERENCE WAS GOOD. THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY HAD CLOSED A FEW WEEKS EARLIER AND THE DEPUTIES WERE AWAY IN THEIR DISTRICTS. THE OPPOSITION SEEMED MIXED UP IN ITS OWN PROBLEMS: THE BARRE PLAN WAS EVINCING ITS FIRST HESITANT SIGNS OF SUCCESS AND POLLS SHOWED THE PRESIDENT'S AND PRIME MINISTER'S POPULARITY ON THE RISE. THE PRESIDENT HIMSELF, AS IS USUALLY THE CASE IN THESE PRESS CONFERENCES, WAS IN GOOD FORM, FAST ON HIS FEET, COURTEOUS, PRECISE WHERE CALLED FOR AND FIRM IN HIS RESPONSES -- ALTHOUGH HE HAS DONE BETTER ON OCCASION IN THE PAST. AS ALWAYS GISCARD SPOKE AT DIFFERENT TIMES TO DIFFERENT AUDIENCES. SOMETIMES TO THE POLITICAL CLASS OF PARIS, SOMETIMES TO HIS ELECTORATE THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY, SOMETIMES TO CIVIL SERVANTS, AND SOMETIMES TO THE PRESS. WHILE THE EXPECTED DRAMATIC GESTURE DID NOT TAKE PLACE, THE CONFERENCE, BY COVERING THE BROAD RANGE OF SUBJECTS THAT PREOCCUPY THE FRENCH AT THIS TIME, SHOULD SERVE TO IMPROVE THE PRESIDENT'S IMAGE FOR A CERTAIN TIME.

2. THE ECONOMY: WITH A THEME THAT THE BARRE PLAN NEEDS TO BE NEITHER MODIFIED NOR COMPLETED BUT CONTINUED, CONFIDENTIAL

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GISCARD EVIDENTLY RULED OUT ANY OVERALL CHANGE IN ECONOMIC POLICY THIS YEAR; BUT IN COMMENTS ON INVESTMENT, EMPLOYMENT, AND INDUSTRIAL STRUCTURE HE LEFT OPEN THE POSSIBILITY OF MEASURES TO ENCOURAGE INVESTMENT IN CERTAIN SECTORS, OR IN CERTAIN CIRCUMSTANCES ASSOCIATED WITH REORGANIZATION OR GLOBAL PROBLEMS, I.E. STEEL AND TEXTILES. GISCARD STATED: "WE CANNOT BECOME PROTECTIONIST" BECAUSE CLOSING OUR FRONTIERS WOULD INVITE OTHERS TO DO THE SAME. HE CITED INFLATION AND UNEMPLOYMENT AS TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN AND STRESSED THE NEED TO REDUCE FRANCE'S TRADE IMBALANCE. IN DEALING WITH OVERALL PRODUCTION, CONSUMPTION AND INVESTMENT TRENDS IN 1976 COMPARED TO 1975, GISCARD CITED POSITIVE FACTORS THAT INDICATE "WE ARE IN A GOOD DIRECTION" THAT MUST BE PURSUED. THE PROBLEM IS ONE OF DISEQUILIBRIUM IN THE BALANCE OF PAYMENTS AND THE DOMESTIC ECONOMY, I.E., INFLATION WHICH THE BARRE PLAN IS DESIGNED TO CORRECT.

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"ALL THE NECESSARY DECISIONS HAVE BEEN TAKEN" AND NOW
IT IS ESSENTIAL TO FOLLOW THROUGH.

3. OVERALL THESE THEMES REPRESENT A STRONG ENDORSEMENT
OF THE BARRE PLAN. THERE IS NOT A NUANCE OF DIFFERENCE
BETWEEN THEM AND RECENT STATEMENTS BY THE PRIME MINIS-
TER. INITIAL REACTIONS TO THE ECONOMIC PART OF GIS-
CARD'S PRESS CONFERENCE HAVE BEEN ALONG PREDICTABLE
LINES, BUT THE IMPORTANT POINT IS THAT, WHILE POLITICAL
ACTIVITY MAY BE PLURALIST AMONG THE PARTIES OF THE MAJ-
ORITY, THE PLAN TO REDRESS THE ECONOMY CURRENTLY IN
PLACE IS "THE DEMOCRATIC ECONOMIC POLICY OF FRANCE,"
VOTED FOR BY A MAJORITY OF THE ASSEMBLY AND THE SENATE.
IN RECENT WEEKS THERE HAS BEEN A PERCEPTIBLE SHIFT OF
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OPINION IN THE MAJORITY PARTIES AND THE PATRONAT IN SUPPORT OF THE BARRE PLAN. MUCH OF THE CREDIT FOR THIS SHIFT IS DUE TO THE PRIME MINISTER'S OWN EFFORTS. GISCARD'S COMMENTS ALSO REFLECT AN IDENTIFICATION WITH THESE EFFORTS. IT REMAINS TO BE SEEN WHETHER A MAJORITY OF THE COUNTRY AS A WHOLE WILL ACCEPT THE BARRE PLAN, THEREBY GIVING IT THE WEIGHT OF PUBLIC SUPPORT, BUT AT LEAST THE POLITICAL PROSPECTS OF THE BARRE PLAN SEEM CONSIDERABLY BRIGHTER THAN THEY WERE SEVERAL MONTHS OR EVEN WEEKS AGO.

4. LABOR: THE SOBER TONE WITH WHICH GISCARD RESPONDED TO THE QUESTIONS OF THE PRESS WAS PARTICULARLY ILLUSTRATED IN HIS HANDLING OF THE QUESTIONS OF UNEMPLOYMENT. HE CITED THE FIGURE OF 1,036,000 REGISTERED UNEMPLOYED AND AVOIDED THE OVER-OPTIMISTIC ESTIMATES OF THE PAST THAT THIS FIGURE WAS SOON TO COME DOWN, NOR DID HE CHOOSE TO READ TOO MUCH IN THE DECEMBER FIGURES OF UNEMPLOYED WHICH SHOWED A SLIGHT DECLINE. HOWEVER, HE DID CALL SPECIAL ATTENTION TO THE ONLY HOPEFUL INDICATOR TO COME OUT OF THE EMPLOYMENT OFFICE TO THE EFFECT THAT THE LENGTH OF AVERAGE TIME THE UNEMPLOYED MUST WAIT BEFORE FINDING ANOTHER JOB HAS DROPPED FROM FIVE TO THREE MONTHS. HE SAW IN THIS EVIDENCE OF AN ACTIVE LABOR MARKET AND THEREFORE AN ENCOURAGING SIGN.

5. EVEN MORE INTERESTING IS GISCARD'S SILENCE ON THE QUESTION OF "CONTRACTUAL POLICY" WHICH MEANS COLLECTIVE BARGAINING IN PUBLIC AND NATIONALIZED SECTORS. WE FEEL THAT THIS WAS A DELIBERATE OMISSION ON THE PART OF THE PRESIDENT SO AS NOT TO INTERFERE WITH THE PRIME MINISTERS LONG TERM EDUCATIONAL EFFORT TO BRING THE UNIONS IN THESE TWO SECTORS TO UNDERSTAND THAT THE DAYS OF RAPID AND EXCESSIVE INCREASE IN REAL WAGES HAD TO COME TO AN END. TRADE UNION REACTION WHILE CRITICAL DID NOT GO BEYOND TRADITIONAL EXPRESSIONS OF REJECTION OF GOF ECON-
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OMIC POLICY. FORCE OUVRIERE IS THE ONLY ONE TO PICK OUT THE ABSENCE OF ANY REFERENCE TO THE CONTRACTUAL POLICY BUT EVEN THIS IS CONSIDERED TO HAVE BEEN DONE FOR SELF-SERVING PURPOSES RATHER THAN AS AN EXPRESSION OF SERIOUS CRITICISM OF GISCARD.

6. THE PRESIDENT AND THE MAJORITY: THE PRESS CONFERENCE WAS A PLATFORM FROM WHICH THE PRESIDENT REMINDED THE FRENCH THAT HE HAS ABSOLUTELY NO INTENTION OF STEPPING DOWN SHOULD THE LEFT WIN THE 1978 LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS. THAT TIES IN DIRECTLY WITH HIS STATEMENT THAT A

FRENCH PRESIDENT SHOULD NOT ENTER INTO ELECTORAL DETAILS,
AND CONFIRMS HIS LATER STATEMENT THAT THE PRESIDENT HIM-
SELF IS ABOVE THE PARTIES AND SHOULD RESERVE HIS INTER-
VENTION FOR QUESTIONS OF PRIME IMPORTANCE TO FRANCE.
THIS DOES NOT CONSTITUTE A CLARIFICATION OF THE PRESI-

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DENT'S POSITION, SINCE GISCARD'S FEELINGS ON THIS MATTER
HAVE BEEN KNOWN FOR SOME TIME; BUT TO HEAR THE WORDS
FROM THE PRESIDENT'S MOUTH, EVEN IF THE AVERAGE FRENCH-
MAN KNOWS IN HIS HEART THAT THE MAN WHO OCCUPIES THE
ELYSEE CAN NEVER REALLY BE ABOVE A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF
POLITICKING, PUTS THE PROBLEM IN BLACK AND WHITE FOR
THE FIRST TIME. AGAIN HIS NAMING OF BARRE AS HEAD OF THE
PARLIAMENTARY MAJORITY AND AS THE MAN WHO WILL LEAD
THE 1978 LEGISLATIVE CAMPAIGN FOR THE MAJORITY IS NO SUR-
PRISE, TYING IN AS IT DOES WITH THE PRESIDENT'S IMAGE
OF HIMSELF AS A MAN ABOVE PARTIES.

7. GISCARD WAS ALSO FIRM ON THE 1978 ELECTIONS REITERATING THAT THEY WOULD TAKE PLACE AS SCHEDULED AND NOT
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BEFORE. PERHAPS THE ONLY REAL NEW POINT IN HIS PRESS CONFERENCE CAME HERE, WHEN HE POINTED OUT THAT PLURALISM IS NATURAL WITHIN THE MAJORITY. GONE IS THE OLD TERM "PRESIDENTIAL MAJORITY" (A PHRASE THAT WAS NEVER PUBLICLY EXPRESSED BY GISCARD HIMSELF), AND INSTEAD COMPETITION WAS HELD UP TO BE BENEFICIAL TO THE MAJORITY. DEVOTING AS HE DID SO MUCH OF HIS PRESS CONFERENCE TO THE MAJORITY ITSELF AND THE MODALITIES OF ITS CONSTRUCTION AND FUNCTIONING, GISCARD, THOUGH PLACING HIMSELF ABOVE POLITICAL PARTIES, SHOWED THAT HE IS NONETHELESS DIRECTLY CONCERNED BY THE WAY THOSE PARTIES THAT SUPPORT HIM FUNCTION BOTH WITHIN THEMSELVES AND AMONG ONE ANOTHER. ON THE QUESTION FOR EXAMPLE ON ELECTORAL STRATEGY, ESPECIALLY FOR PARIS, THE PRESIDENT WAS SURPRISINGLY CONCISE, SHOWING THAT HE CONSIDERS THESE ELECTIONS A QUESTION OF THE ABOVE-MENTIONED "PRIME IMPORTANCE."

8. PLURALISM: THE LEITMOTIF OF THE PRESS CONFERENCE WAS PLURALISM. AMPLY UTILIZED IN HIS BOOK "DEMOCRATIE FRANCAISE", TO WHICH HE REFERRED DURING HIS PRESS CONFERENCE, GISCARD EMPLOYED THE TERM TO DESCRIBE SUCH WIDELY DIVERSE THINGS AS EDUCATION, MAJORITY PARTIES, AND BUSINESS. IN ESSENCE PLURALISM IS THE KEYSTONE OF HIS CONCEPT OF A "LIBERAL, ADVANCED SOCIETY", AND HE AVAILED HIMSELF OF THE PRESS CONFERENCE TO PUSH THIS CONCEPT ONCE AGAIN. THE TERM IS AT ONCE PROFOUND ENOUGH TO APPEAL TO INTELLECTUALS AND SIMPLE ENOUGH TO BE UNDERSTOOD BY THE AVERAGE ELECTOR. IT HAS THE ADDED ADVANTAGE OF NEWNESS, WHICH THE PRESIDENT IS EMPLOYING TO HIS OWN ADVANTAGE.

9. DIVERSE: ON THE ABOU DAOUD AFFAIR, THE PRESIDENT'S REMARKS WERE DESIGNED TO CUT THE GOVERNMENT'S LOSSES DOMESTICALLY. HIS HARSHNESS IN REMINDING THE GERMANS THAT THEY HAD CAPITULATED BEFORE TERRORIST DEMANDS AND FREED THREE OF THE MUNICH ASSASSINS GAVE HIM AN OPPOR
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OPPORTUNITY TO INVOKE FRENCH NATIONALISM AGAINST FOREIGN INTERFERENCE AND CRITICISM. IN NARROW POLITICAL TERMS, IT MAY HAVE BEEN THE BEST POSSIBLE TACTIC FOR HIM, AND FROM THE PRESS REACTIONS WE HAVE THE FEELING HE EXTRAC-

TED MAXIMUM NATIONAL BENEFIT FROM THE OPPORTUNITY. THERE WERE NO SURPRISES AT ALL IN SUCH THINGS AS THE FRANCOISE CLAUSTRE AFFAIR, CAPITAL PUNISHMENT OR THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT. ONE PERSONAL NOTE, HOWEVER, WAS THE PRESIDENT'S REACTION TO THE ACCUSATION THAT HE HAS NOT BEEN FIRM. THIS, AS WELL AS HIS REACTION TO THE ABOU DAOUD AFFAIR, IS THE KIND OF LANGUAGE THAT FRENCHMEN IN GENERAL AND GAULLISTS IN PARTICULAR UNDERSTAND AND APPRECIATE. IRONICALLY, THE VERY TONE THE PRESIDENT TOOK WHEN DISMISSING THE LACK OF FIRMNESS ON HIS PART, AND WHEN DISCOUNTING THE WHOLE ISSUE AS A FALSE DEBATE BASED MORE ON THE TONE OF WORDS THAN ON HIS CHARACTER ITSELF, SUPPORTS THE VERY THESIS THAT THE PRESIDENT CAN BE FIRM WHEN NEED BE. AS YVES GUENA, SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE RPR, RECENTLY SAID, BEYOND A CERTAIN NUMBER OF MISTAKES, A CHIEF OF STATE CAN ONLY MAKE MORE MISTAKES. SO THE PRESIDENT FINDS HIMSELF CONVINCED OF STUBBORNNESS WHEN HE DOES NOT GIVE WAY AND FLACCIDITY WHEN HE DOES.

10. PARTY REACTIONS: THE LEFT WAS PREDICTABLY HOSTILE TO THE PRESIDENT'S PRESS CONFERENCE. GEORGES MARCHAIS, SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE FRENCH COMMUNIST PARTY, CORRECTLY POINTED OUT THAT THE MAJORITY IS UNITED IN PRINCIPLE, UNITED AS CONCERNS OVERALL PROGRAM AND POLICY. WHAT HE DID NOT ADD, OF COURSE -- BUT WHICH IS APPARENT TO ALL -- IS THAT THE PROBLEM OF THE MAJORITY CONCERNS MORE PERSONALITIES THAN IT DOES PRINCIPLES. THE PS LAMENTS THE LACK OF A PROMISED CLARIFICATION AND NATURALLY THE FAR RIGHT AND THE FAR LEFT ARE PARTICULARLY

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HOSTILE. THE EFFECT OF SUCH A PRESS CONFERENCE TAKES SOME TIME TO MAKE ITSELF FELT THROUGHOUT FRANCE, BUT MANY COMMENTATORS ARE IN AGREEMENT THAT THE PRESIDENT HAS TAKEN ONE MORE STEP IN HIS EFFORTS TO PRESIDENTIALIZE THE REGIME. AS THIS CANNOT BE DONE LEGISLATIVELY WITHOUT ENCOUNTERING GREAT DIFFICULTY, GISCARD IS WORKING TOWARDS A KIND OF DE FACTO PRESIDENTIALIZATION BY DELCARING HIMSELF ABOVE PARTIES, BY CLEARLY DESIGNATING CERTAIN TASKS TO HIS PRIME MINISTER AND BY FORCIBLY REMINDING THE FRENCH THAT HE IS CALLING THE PLAYS AS REGARDS LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS AND OVERALL MAJORITY POLICY. NOTICEABLY ABSENT FROM GISCARD'S REMARKS WAS ANY REFERENCE TO JACQUES CHIRAC, THOUGH THIS IS MERELY TITFOR-TAT, SINCE CHIRAC HIMSELF POINTEDLY ABSTAINS FROM CONFIDENTIAL

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MENTIONING THE PRESIDENT'S NAME IN HIS PUBLIC APPEARANCES. LACKING ALSO WAS ANY EMPHASIS ON THE OPPOSITION, THOUGH THE WORD "COLLECTIVIST" DID APPEAR WHEN THE PRESIDENT WAS POINTING OUT THE DIVERSITY OF OPINIONS WITHIN THE FRENCH OPPOSITION.

11. WHILE THERE IS GENERAL DISAPPOINTMENT OVER THE LACK OF SOMETHING DRAMATIC IN THE PRESS CONFERENCE, MAJORITY REACTIONS, INCLUDING THOSE OF CHIRAC'S RPR, ARE FAVORABLE. EVEN THE PRESIDENT'S COMMENT -- THAT HE HAD TOLD GAULLIST POLITICIANS THAT NO PARTY WAS TO ENJOY HIS FAVORITISM BUT THAT THEY HAD NOT TAKEN THE MESSAGE -- WAS NOT TAKEN ILL BUT THE RPR, WHO SAW IN IT PROOF THAT THE PRESIDENT WAS DISTANCING HIMSELF FROM HIS OWN INDEPENDENT REPUBLICAN PARTY. NATURALLY CENTRISTS AND MANY

INDEPENDENT REPUBLICANS WERE DISAPPOINTED THAT THERE WOULD BE NO MODIFICATION IN ELECTORAL LAW, BUT ROGER CHINAUD, PRESIDENT OF THE RI ASSEMBLY GROUP, WAS PLEASED AT THE PRESIDENT'S REITERATING THE NECESSITY TO COORDINATE WHEN SUCH IS IN THE INTERESTS OF THE MAJORITY AS A WHOLE. HIS UNDERSCORING THE UTILITY AND JUSTICE OF PLURALISM WITHIN THE MAJORITY IS A TIP-OF-THE-HAT TO THE RPR WHICH HAS LONG BEEN WORRIED OVER THE PRESIDENT'S SUPPOSED SUPPORT FOR THE OTHER PARTIES OF THE MAJORITY TO THE DETRIMENT OF THE RPR.

12. CONCLUSION: JACQUES CHIRAC WILL MEET PRIME MINISTER BARRE ON WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 19, AND UNDOUBTEDLY THE TWO MEN WILL DISCUSS THE PRESIDENT'S PRESS CONFERENCE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES ON ELECTORAL STRATEGY, BOTH FOR THE MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS IN TWO MONTHS' TIME AND THE LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS IN MARCH 1978. IF THE PRESIDENT'S PRIMARY PURPOSE WAS TO CLARIFY THE POLITICAL SITUATION, IT IS QUESTIONABLE WHETHER OR NOT HE HAS SUCCEEDED. IF, ON THE OTHER HAND, IT IS TO GIVE THE IMPRESSION THAT HE IS NOT CEDING TO EVENTS AND THAT HE IS STILL MORE OR LESS CONFIDENTIAL

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IN COMMAND, ONE MAY VIEW THE PRESS CONFERENCE IN A LIGHT MORE FAVORABLE TO GISCARD. THE OVERRIDING THEME OF THE PRESS CONFERENCE IS THAT A SINGLE PARTY CAN NO LONGER BE ASSOCIATED WITH THE ELYSEE AND THAT THERE MUST BE SOME KIND OF CONSENSUS IF THE CURRENT MAJORITY IS TO WIN IN THE FORTHCOMING ELECTIONS.

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